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ABSTRACT

Consensus is important in the making of a policy decision. If a decision is reached without consensus, morale and unit satisfaction may both suffer. With genuine consensus, a unit tends to willingly support and implement the new policy. After analyzing how observed small groups had actually reached consensus, the following ten techniques were developed: (1) orient the group, (2) insist on true consensus, (3) maintain your position as long as it is valid, (4) seek out differences in opinion, (5) remain open to other opinions, (6) be willing to compromise, (7) contribute frequently to the discussion, (8) use group pronouns rather than personal pronouns, (9) give adequate information, and (10) clarify the discussion. A study of group decision making showed that groups that followed these ten techniques were significantly more successful in reaching a consensus, and members of the successful groups were significantly more satisfied with their own performance and the performance of their group. Groups that achieve true consensus have a better chance of making the right decision at the first attempt. (JF)

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PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES FOR ACHIEVING CONSENSUS

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The Boss abruptly cut off the discussion by saying: "I think it will lead to unnecessary conflict if we talk about the proposal further or consider alternatives at this time. If you'll vote for my suggestion, I'll be able to support one of your plans later on."

There are times, of course, when a leader must make an independent decision and stick to it. But increasingly, policy decisions are hammered out in the give and take of small-group discussion. Problem solving is certainly a goal of policy-planning groups at all levels, but even more important should be consensus or agreement. If a policy decision is reached without consensus, morale and unit satisfaction both may suffer, with genuine consensus, a unit tends to support and implement the new policy willingly.

In this case, the Boss may have thought he was solving the problem. In fact, he only wasted the group's time because he terminated the discussion before the group had reached consensus. By not taking advantage of important side benefits of the group process, the Boss failed to meet fully his responsibilities as a manager.

Ten Techniques

Some of my colleagues in the communications field and I have recently analyzed how small groups we observed actually reached consensus. Here are ten techniques we found which help a group reach consensus more efficiently in problem-solving discussion.

Orient the group

Help the group reach its goal by emphasizing facts, making helpful suggestions, and trying to resolve conflict. Studies show that even one group member skilled in providing orientation can influence whether or

not a group reaches consensus. Groups composed entirely of persons with orienting ability are even more successful in reaching consensus. Orienting statements can relate to the actual process of the discussion as well as content: "What you've said makes sense to me. How do the rest of you feel?" or "So far we seem to agree on the first two points. Let's move on to the third," or "I don't believe we've heard from Herb yet," or "Perhaps we are closer to agreement than we thought." Questions that ask for clarification or statements that get the discussion back on track also serve to orient the group (1).

Insist on true consensus

Avoid cop-outs like majority vote, coin-flipping, and bargaining. These techniques only seem to reduce conflict; in fact, all they do is postpone it. Of course group leaders must attempt to resolve disruptive conflict, but this resolution must come through reasoned discourse and sensitivity to the needs of others. A healthy clash of ideas may actually be productive. But if a problem is solved through voting, chance, or negotiation, some members will be dissatisfied, and the outcome will not be agreement or true consensus (2).

Keep maintaining your position as long as it is valid

Don't change your mind simply to avoid conflict. If the reasons for thinking the way you did still hold, then don't switch sides capriciously. Generally, consensus is built over a period of time, little by little, with agreement on minor points. Sometimes, of course, consensus can come as a major insight, and if so, participants will want to modify their stance to go along with the group. But groups should be suspicious if agreement comes too easily or too soon. The group should investigate the

reasons and be sure that everyone accepts the solution for similar or complementary reasons. When members change their minds, they should change them based on facts and logical reasoning (3).

Seek out differences in opinion

Differing opinions are both natural and to be expected. Disagreement can aid the problem-solving process because ideas will not go untested. It is poor economy to agree too quickly in a discussion and then have the idea fail when it is implemented. A solution that stands testing within the group will more likely stand on its own merits once it leaves the group. Similarly, expression and discussion of a wide range of opinions and a chance for all to have their voices heard will increase the satisfaction of participants once consensus is secured. Writers about small-group communication have long advocated encouraging other opinions, and recent research supports this advice (4).

Remain open to other opinions

Don't be overly opinionated. This suggestion is clearly the corollary to the preceding guideline. We have all known people who seek the views of others with no intent to be influenced by them: "Don't confuse me with the facts; my mind is made up." Of course, it is important to take a stance, to present it as lucidly and logically as possible, and to maintain the position as long as it is tenable. But it is also important to be alert for the possibility of consensus by listening and carefully considering alternate views and analysis of others. This problem of being opinionated is even more significant with leaders than with other group members. Studies have shown that a low or moderately opinionated leader is held in higher esteem by other group members than a highly

opinionated one. And the low opinionated leader's group, it has been found, is much more likely to reach consensus. One way to avoid being opinionated is to put the emphasis on facts rather than unsupported assertions (5).

Be willing to compromise

Don't assume a win/lose stance. When discussion reaches an absolute stalemate, search for an alternative that might be acceptable to both sides. Many times there is no one correct solution, but rather the problem is to find a solution that everyone can "live with." It is much better to have all group members reasonably satisfied than to have some very satisfied and others extremely dissatisfied. On the other hand, groups should always return to the original objective to test whether the compromise consensus is really responsive. Nothing is worse than a group decision which so waters down a good idea that its thrust is blunted (6).

Contribute frequently to the discussion

Studies suggest that it is not the duration but the frequency of participation that orients the group and aids in reaching a consensus. This guideline may appear to violate the usual rule that a participant should be a good listener and react to the comments of others. Good listening is vital. Yet studies tell us that group members view persons who enter the discussion most often as being better participants than those who speak less often. Active participants also tend to be more satisfied with the discussion and thus are better motivated to accept the consensus (7).

Use group pronouns rather than personal pronouns

Studies show that in groups which do not reach consensus the group tends to use more self referent words, such I, me, my, and mine. Groups

which reach consensus, on the other hand, are more apt to use group-referent words, such as we, our, and us. Obviously the use of "group" words conveys a sense of unselfishness and togetherness to other group members, whereas "self" words convey an opposite meaning (8).

Give adequate information

An opinionated person may give primarily opinions rather than support for the opinions. But persons who are not highly opinionated may also simply fail to make their points clear. All participants should be sure to provide enough information or evidence to support their views. Some experts suggest that groups will increase chances of reaching consensus if they emphasize facts, statistics, and opinions of qualified sources which bear directly on some aspect of the question at hand. Studies have shown that groups which use stereotyped or redundant language and rote thinking, instead of seeking new approaches, are less likely to reach consensus (9).

Clarify the discussion

Make sure that the group's problem-solving activity is understandable, orderly, and focused on one issue at a time. Consensus often comes more easily if each of the factors is weighed individually and systematically. Sometimes a single group member can do little about planning for the most efficient problem-solving unless that member is also the leader. But each participant has an obligation to stick to the subject, to avoid side discussions, and to clarify the issues with questions, so that everyone can have an equal understanding. Each participant can use proper orienting techniques to help keep the discussion focused and self-discipline to prevent the introduction of extraneous or unrelated matters (10).

Analysis

These ten techniques derived from experimental research have proven effective for groups attempting to reach consensus. In an unpublished study of group decision making, I supplied ten, 5-person groups with a list of guidelines similar to these; ten other groups received no guidance. I found that groups with the guidelines were significantly more successful in reaching a consensus, and members of the successful groups were significantly more satisfied with their own performance and the performance of their group. In addition to these studies, field observation of actual functioning groups suggests that most policy-making, problem-solving groups employing these ten techniques can enhance their ability to reach consensus.

Both group membership and the nature of the problem can, of course, make a difference. The techniques seem most effective with those who have had limited experience in solving problems in small groups, but they also proved effective with experienced members as well. Some findings also suggest that the process of reaching consensus on "affective" problems (those which generate an emotional response) may differ from that of "substantive" ones (those where the solution comes primarily from analysis of facts). For example, problems of bussing school children or of building a major airport near a housing area are affective problems, whereas the question of whether to surface a driveway with asphalt or concrete is more substantive. Being opinionated, overusing personal pronouns, and viewing the issue as a win/lose transaction all seem to be a greater hindrance to consensus with affective problems. Lack of information presents a greater problem with substantive ones. But whatever the nature of the problem, consensus should always be the goal of the discussion.

Recap

Let us look again at what the Boss told his group: "I think it will lead to unnecessary conflict if we talk about the proposal further or consider other alternatives at this point. If you'll vote for my suggestion, I'll be able to support one of your plans later on." His statement violates in some degree all of our suggested techniques. The Boss failed to:

- Orient the group with facts and suggestions
- Insist on true consensus
- Encourage others to stick to valid views
- Seek differences in opinion
- Remain open to other opinions
- Be willing to compromise
- Allow others to contribute freely
- Use group pronouns rather than personal ones
- Give adequate information
- Insure understandable, orderly, focused activity.

The chances for consensus with group leaders like this Boss are not favorable. It may take time to reach a true consensus, but the time will be well spent in terms of morale and group satisfaction. And the time spent will also be cost effective when compared to the time and effort needed to undo a wrong decision. Groups which achieve true consensus have a better chance of making the right decision the first time. By practicing effective consensus techniques, the manager makes sure the group decision will be supported.

Notes

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